Unit .15

Session .03

God Declares a New Covenant

Scripture

Jeremiah 31:31-40

31 "Look, the days are coming"—this is the LORD's declaration—"when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. **32** This one will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors on the day I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt—my covenant that they broke even though I am their master"—the LORD's declaration. **33** "Instead, this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days"—the LORD's declaration. "I will put my teaching within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. **34** No longer will one teach his neighbor or his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they will all know me, from the least to the greatest of them"—this is the LORD's declaration. "For I will forgive their iniquity and never again remember their sin. **35** "This is what the LORD says: The one who gives the sun for light by day, the fixed order of moon and stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea and makes its waves roar—the LORD of Armies is his name: **36** If this fixed order departs from before me—this is the LORD's declaration—only then will Israel's descendants cease to be a nation before me forever. **37** "This is what the LORD says: Only if the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below explored, will I reject all of Israel's descendants because of all they have done—this is the LORD's declaration. **38** "Look, the days are coming"—the LORD's declaration—"when the city from the Tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate will be rebuilt for the LORD. **39** A measuring line will once again stretch out straight to the hill of Gareb and then turn toward Goah. **40** The whole valley—the corpses, the ashes, and all the fields as far as the Kidron Valley to the corner of the Horse Gate to the east—will be holy to the LORD. It will never be uprooted or demolished again."

Intro Options

Main Point:
God writes His law on our hearts and sends the Holy Spirit to dwell in us.

Option 1

Give each of your kids a writing utensil and a paper. Ask each of them to write down the top ten best parts about being a Christian. Give them time to think of their answers and then have them share those reasons (if you have a large group and limited time, you could ask kids only to share their top three or top five reasons). As a group, try to come up with the top ten best things about being a Christian for the group; out of all the reasons put forward, what might be the top five?

See if any of them overlap with the promises of the new covenant (e.g., a changed heart; knowing God himself; having eternal forgiveness). If they do overlap, use this coinciding to lead into the new covenant. If they didn't bring up points in the new covenant, introduce the lesson by saying that the new covenant will provide us with reasons even better than what the students had already imagined.

Option 2

Have students come up with a list of different kinds of people in the Old Testament: shepherds, kings, farmers, maidservants, priests, etc. Once you've made your list, assign each kid one of those roles (you can have more than one student in each role). Their job now is to pretend to be that role. Each student has found a lamp and rubbed it, only to find a genie popping out to surprise them. The student (in their character role) gets three wishes. What are those wishes? Caveat: whatever else the students' roles may be, they are good, faithful, God-fearing Jews.

Let them share what their character's three wishes might be. Look for any overlaps with the new covenant (e.g., one might wish for a closer relationship with God). Where there are overlaps, use them to introduce the lesson. If there are no (or few) overlaps, suggest that God might have something even better than what any Old Testament believer might have thought of: namely, a new heart, knowing God intimately, and once-for-all forgiveness.

Alternate: you could do this same exercise, but have the students adopt personas of present-day Christians instead of Old Testament Jews. See if there is any overlap with the new covenant (e.g., a closer walk with God). If they don't say anything coinciding with the new covenant, suggest the Bible may offer us something even better than we had previously imagined.

TEACHING PLAN

Our study today is going to offer a glimpse into the new covenant God would establish with His people. Because no one is able to perfectly obey the law, God promised a new covenant; one not written on stone or parchment, but written on the hearts of His people. Through this new covenant, God would not only write His law on our hearts, but also give the gift of the Holy Spirit to indwell every believer, helping them to walk in His ways.

Read Jeremiah 31:31-33.

The message Jeremiah delivered may have been quite different from what the people expected. In fact, given their cultural and political situation, the people more than likely wanted to hear a message about prosperity, peace with surrounding nations, and stability in their lives. But that isn't the message they received. Jeremiah's message from the Lord might not have met the people's expectations in terms of the physical, but it cuts straight to the heart of the matter—their relationship with God. It was apparent that the people's broken relationship with God wasn't God's fault or because of the old covenant He established—the problem was deep within the hearts of God's people.

- **Can you think of any instances in the biblical storyline up to this point where God has shown Himself to be faithful, even when His people weren't?**
- **Why do you think the Bible emphasizes that we ultimately have a heart problem, not a behavioral problem?**

In our Western culture, we believe all of our problems can be solved if we work harder, study more, stay up later, and rise earlier. But the relationship problem between God and man can't be fixed by more or harder work. Instead, God promised to bring about the necessary change in people's inner nature, which would make them capable of obedience. Furthermore, this would make them capable of a deep, rich, abiding love with the Creator of their souls. God would set His law within them and write it on their hearts, minds, and wills. The old covenant was written on stone (Ex. 31:18; 34:28-29; Deut. 4:13; 5:22) and scroll (Ex. 24:7). The new covenant would be written on the tender flesh of a new heart. Truth be told, there can be no loving obedience of the sovereign God apart from His transforming work on the heart.

It's important to emphasize that this new covenant would be within God's people. Many people today think of believing the gospel as a choice between going to heaven and going to hell. They know they don't want to go to hell, so they choose to trust in Christ in order to be saved and live eternally in heaven instead.

While it's true that trusting in Christ for forgiveness and righteousness is indeed the only way to spend eternity with God, if that's all we think of when we hear the gospel we underestimate its implications. The gospel message is this: Because our hearts are fully and completely corrupted by sin, we need a new heart that is turned toward God.

- **Have you ever been tempted to follow God simply because of the desire for outward prosperity and peace or to go to heaven? How is it possible for your heart to be redirected toward a deep love for God?**

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
God writes His law on our hearts and sends the Holy Spirit to dwell in us.

Jeremiah 31

31-33. So what is this new covenant? A covenant simply means a formal, solemn, and binding agreement. But biblical covenants are not agreements between equals; instead, biblical covenants are based on grace. The covenant between God and His people was established so that the stronger party, God, might rain down grace on the weaker party, humanity. Simply put: God loved His people so much that He was bonding himself to them although they could do nothing in return. And these promises were not just for the people of Israel. The Old Testament proclaimed a future for God's people, a future not realized in Jeremiah's day. These promises are for all of God's people, for all those who hear the gospel and believe.

But why a new covenant? Why get rid of the old covenant made at Mount Sinai? In order to understand this, we must start at the very beginning. Sin entered the world when Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit, and God cast them out of His presence. Ever since, the results of humanity's sinful nature has been getting worse and worse. In the case of the Israelites, we see a wicked cycle. Israel would repent, but only for a short time, and then they would turn back to their false gods. God sent Israel into judgment for their disobedience, not because God is a vengeful God, but because of His faithfulness to His word and the love He has for His people not to leave them in their sin.

99 Essential Doctrines (p. 80, DDG)

Christ as Reconciliation

Ever since the fall of the first man and woman in the garden of Eden, God and human beings have been estranged. Sin resulted not only in an estranged relationship with God but also in enmity between God and humanity. Sin is an infinite offense against an infinite God. Thankfully, God loves His enemies and has sent Christ to be the reconciler between us and God. Through Christ's death, God provides the means whereby that broken relationship is restored and renewed (Rom. 6:23; 2 Cor. 5:18-19).

TEACHING PLAN

Read Jeremiah 31:34a.

This new covenant meets us at our deepest need because our hearts are engraved with sin—it offers the promise of a new heart indwelled by God. This new covenant gives us the amazing privilege of living in fellowship with our Creator. Through this promise, we have the privilege of a heart that truly knows God. We will see Him face to face. No matter how hard we seek after the Lord here on earth, we will always see a diluted image of Him. The image will always be in some way distorted by our humanity. But in heaven? No distortions. We will experience perfect and complete intimacy with God Almighty. The only way we can get there is through the gospel. Because the gospel has solved our problem of a sinful and replaced it with a heart indwelled by God, we can live with the privilege of having a heart that knows God.

- **What does the fact that God desires to make Himself known demonstrate of His character? What are some ways we can grow in our knowledge of God now?**

Read Jeremiah 31:34b-40.

God is omniscient, a fancy term for "all-knowing." So how can God be all-knowing and never again remember our sin? These two seem to contradict. However, God can choose not to remember or count our sin against us because Jesus has chosen to carry the punishment that we deserve. Instead of punishing us as we deserve for our sins, God removes our sins as far as the east is from the west (Ps. 103:12). Imagine standing on a mountaintop and you look east toward the sunrise. Then you look west, where the sun will set, and you realize that the reaches of the east and of the west never meet. Scripture use this as a clear picture that God forgives and forgets our sins.

We were created to live in intimate fellowship with God. We see this in the first days of creation before the world was broken by sin, when God created man in His own image. Part of being made in the image of God means having the capacity to relate to God in a way unlike the rest of creation. These first humans were able to live in complete, unbroken fellowship with their Creator.

Jesus knew the greatest purpose of mankind is to know and enjoy God forever. He clearly summarized this truth in John 17:3. For Jesus, the very essence of eternal life is the knowledge of God, only accessible by men and women through the gospel. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the new covenant we have been waiting for. As Jeremiah would prophesy, the new covenant would actually meet us at the heart level, doing for us what we would never do for ourselves. In this new covenant, the covenant of the gospel of Jesus Christ, God would give us a new heart not engraved with sin, but indwelled by Him.

- **How will you point someone to Jesus this week towards the knowledge of God and the forgiveness of sins?**

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
God writes His law on our hearts and sends the Holy Spirit to dwell in us.

Jeremiah 31

34a. The term "know" in this verse reveals the intimate personal knowledge between two persons who are committed wholly to one another in a relationship. The result is not just knowledge of the law but knowledge of the Lord. This leads to a relationship, which was the impossible goal of the old covenant because of the sin on the people.

In the new covenant era, the apostle Peter had a vision. He saw heaven opened up and what looked like a large sheet coming down. On it were all four-footed animals, reptiles, and birds, and a voice told him to kill the animals and eat them. Peter exclaimed that he could never do that because it directly violated the Jewish food laws (Acts 10:9-16). But God was teaching Peter a lesson—that he must no longer call any person impure or unclean. Due to the vision, Peter understood that God doesn't show favoritism; He doesn't exclude any nation or ethnicity from the offer of salvation (10:28,34). Simply stated, all may know God intimately and personally. All may have access to Him through the blood of His very precious Son, Jesus Christ.

To know God in an intimate way is not just a future promise – there is an "already" through the Holy Spirit.[1]

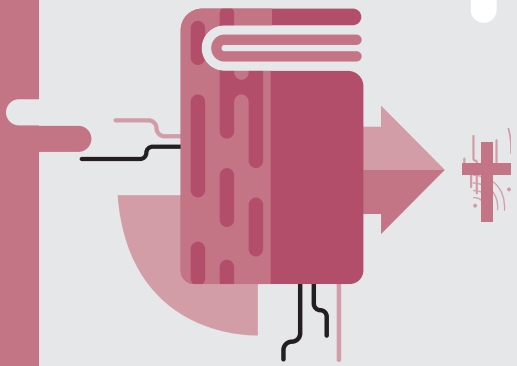
40. It was in such fields of the Kidron Valley that King Josiah had Hilkiah the high priest burn the objects of idolatry purged from the temple (1 Kings 23:4). Thus the point of v. 40 is that the defilement caused by Judah's sins (Jer. 2:7, 23; 7:30-34; 19:13; 32:34-35) would be reversed forever and that consequently the city would never again fall under the Lord's curse of destruction.[2]

Activity

Pretend heaven's imaginary High Council has hired your student body to create advertisements for the new covenant. They want you to put together an advertising campaign to call people from the old covenant to the new covenant. You might use a theme like, "New and Super-Improved!" or "Better than the Old!" Have your students get into small groups and decide which medium they want to produce: a commercial (a skit), a radio jingle (an audio skit and/or a song with catchy tune and lyrics), a website banner or newspaper advertisement (a drawing), or a post on Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, or other social media. Once they've figured out their groups and their media. Some groups should advertise the need for the new covenant; some groups should emphasize how the new covenant brings about knowledge of God; other groups should focus on how the new covenant provides lasting forgiveness. See what they come up with, and let them share their productions with the larger group.

(p. 82, DDG) Christ Connection

Despite having God's law, God's people were still unable to obey Him because of the sinfulness of their hearts. The prophet Jeremiah prophesied about a coming day when God would write His law on His people's hearts and provide lasting forgiveness of sin. This prophecy points to God's provision of Jesus. Through Jesus, God offers us forgiveness, and through the Holy Spirit, God enables us to obey His commands.



GOD DECLARES A NEW COVENANT

Jeremiah 31:31–40

GOD DECLARES A NEW COVENANT

God writes His law on our hearts and sends the Holy Spirit to dwell in us.

JESUS CONNECTION

Despite having God's law, God's people were still unable to obey Him because of the sinfulness of their hearts. The prophet Jeremiah told about a coming day when God would write His law on His people's hearts and provide lasting forgiveness of sin. When we trust in Jesus' work on the cross and allow the Holy Spirit to work within us, God forgives us and enables us to obey His commands.

LIFEWISE QUALITY

FORGIVENESS – Erasing a debt that another person owes me.

HEAD

What was God basing His covenant and promise of forgiveness on—the people's obedience or His own faithfulness? Why is that good news for us?

The people were living in times of political upheaval and cultural unrest. God could have promised them peace and prosperity, but He didn't. What did God promise them?

HEART

Forgiveness is a necessary ingredient for strong relationships. How does forgiveness help restore a broken relationship?

Is forgiveness by itself enough to make everything right again?

How might God's willingness to forgive you because of Jesus affect how you react to those who hurt you?

HANDS

An apology is often the first step to asking for and giving forgiveness. An effective apology has four parts:

- The words "I'm sorry."
- A clear explanation of the offense: "I'm sorry for speaking to you so unkindly."
- An acknowledgement of harm: "I know I hurt your feelings."
- A request for forgiveness: "Please forgive me," or "Will you forgive me?"

How good are you at apologizing? How good are you at receiving an apology and offering forgiveness?

Write out an apology for something you know you need to ask forgiveness for. Ask God for the courage and opportunity to offer that apology to the one you hurt.